



Historically Speaking...

Could there have been a first real Hoosier?

For people in Indiana, at least, one of the most intriguing mysteries about the state's past is where the expression "Hoosier" came from. Explanations range from "husher," a label given to uncouth frontiersmen, to the assumption that "Hoosier" was originally "hoozer" in the Cumberland dialect of England.

Now comes a theory that seems to have more substance than the others. Back in the days when the Methodist Church was expanding westward into Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky by way of circuit-riding preachers, the Rev. Francis Asbury and other riders had a traveling companion by the name of Harry Hoosier.

Hoosier apparently had a way with words. In an article in the June 1995 issue of *Indiana Magazine of History*, William D. Pierson de-

Pierson continues, "not everyone in America looked with favor upon illiterate black preachers who preached to both black and white audiences, nor were more conservative southerners impressed with the whites who would heed a Negro's admonitions on proper conduct and the way to salvation."

According to Pierson, southerners already looked down their noses at Methodists as unsophisticated and illiterate, but especially because Methodists questioned the morality of slavery.

"Therefore it does not seem at all unlikely that Methodists and then other rustics of the back country could have been called 'Hoosiers'...disciples of the illiterate black exhorter Harry Hoosier...as a term of derision," wrote Pierson. "In fact, this would be the simplest explanation of the derivation of the word and, on simplicity alone, the Harry Hoosier etymology is worth serious consideration."

The author noted that "Black Harry" was particularly disliked by Baptists in Virginia because he preached against Calvinism and the irrevocability of grace.

In comparing the various explanations for Hoosier, Pierson concluded that the case for all of them is circumstantial, "but the best of the group in explaining how, where, and why the term came to use is the theory that the word comes from a man's name. Such an etymology would offer Indiana a plausible and worthy first Hoosier... 'Black Harry'...the greatest preacher of his day, a man who rejected slavery and stood up for morality and the common man."

Harry Hoosier died in 1806. Methodism was spread to Indiana by circuit riders and through immigration of pioneers from Virginia and the Carolinas.

—By Rose McIlveen

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Here's one more theory on the derivation of the word 'Hoosier'

scribes the former slave as "small, very dark, physically powerful and keen-eyed, as well as an enthusiastic orator."

Hoosier was illiterate when he took his name, so his surname has no definite spelling, explained Pierson. "But the spellings his contemporaries gave it...Hoosier, Hosier, Hossier, Hersure, Hoshure, Hosure and Hoshur...suggest the phonetic character of what must have been his own pronunciation."

The uneducated orator, who had the nickname "Black Harry," became a well-known camp meeting preacher. "Of course,"